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Tess Feldman

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IT ISN'T EASY BEING GREEN: NECESSARY ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY IN CHICAGO

by TESS FELDMAN

With Richard Daley's term as Mayor of Chicago at an end, the city can look back on the policies he implemented over two decades of leadership.¹ Perhaps Mayor Daley's most visible legacies are the environmental programs he implemented during his tenure. These include landscaped medians² and green roof projects on city buildings.³ Yet, some of Chicago's environmental policies that could yield the most beneficial results have either been abandoned or need development. To increase sustainability, expand public participation in conservation efforts and create a "green" culture, Chicago needs more than green roofs.⁴

Attention to the environment was a clear concern to voters in the 2011 Chicago Mayoral election.⁵ But the environmentally sensitive and progressive policies that will be most beneficial to the public interest may be the programs most in danger of neglect by current Mayor Rahm Emanuel. These programs include: recycling, building reuse, and “invisible” projects.

REINSTATE A SUCCESSFUL RECYCLING PROGRAM

Although positive efforts of the current Office of the Environment include collecting unwanted phone books and encouraging residents to recycle holiday lights⁶, Chicago still lacks a comprehensive recycling program.⁷ Chicago attempted a blue-bag recycling program, which allowed residents to dispose of both garbage and recyclables in the same bin. However, the program did not succeed, according to the New York Times, because of “Chicagoans’ unwillingness to participate”.⁸

One unfortunate legacy of that failure is the public’s current negative attitude toward residential recycling.⁹ There are recycling centers run by private companies within the city, but consumers must access the services by bringing recyclables to the recycler. As there are few sites, residents may be required to travel long distances to drop off their recyclables.¹⁰ Only a handful of neighborhoods have adopted alternative recycling programs, and the city drop off centers can be inconvenient.¹¹ To make a recycling program successful, the task should be made easier and promoted throughout the city.

Kevin Crist sees recycling as a way to begin public participation in conservation.¹² He is the lead project manager for Intrinsic Landscaping, a company that installs green roofs and living walls.¹³ A green roof is a vegetated roof cover, frequently created by building a waterproofing layer and drainage system underneath plants and vegetation, all contained on the roof.¹⁴ Living walls are “self sufficient vertical gardens that are attached to the exterior or interior of a building. The plants root in a structural support which is fastened to the wall itself.”¹⁵ Intrinsic Landscaping has created projects at locations including the CTA Headquarters building, the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, dozens of schools, and commercial and residential buildings in and around Chicago.¹⁶

Mr. Crist’s concern for the environment extends beyond his work with green roofing.¹⁷ He noted that while visible projects like planter parkways and living



These blue recycling carts are only available in certain parts of the city.

walls bring awareness to environmental issues, residents need to realize that their active participation in recycling fosters action and awareness.¹⁸

Mr. Crist stressed that people need to regain confidence in a functional recycling program despite the failure of the blue bag program.¹⁹ According to

him, “Placing sorting containers at bus stops and parks in high traffic areas with tourists would not only increase awareness but also educate people how to recycle on their own”.²⁰

BUILDING REUSE

Environmentally sensitive regulations for new construction were central to Mayor Daley’s focus on the environment. For example, the City has mandated “green” policies for privately funded renovation and new construction. For most new planned developments, the City requires some type of green certification and at least part of the roof structure to be a green roof.²¹

New construction should also include measures to recycle elements of preexisting structures. As Mr. Crist states, “The greenest thing you can do is not build a new building,” regardless of the eco-friendly measures that new building includes.²² Since January 1, 2007, permits issued by the City mandate “at least fifty percent of construction and demolition debris, as measured by weight, be recycled or reused.”²³ However, the mandate is applicable to only a narrow category of residential developments.²⁴ Expanding such requirements would help move Chicago toward accomplishing the larger goal of sustainability.

CONCLUSION

Mayor Daley’s environmental initiatives were both visible and extensive throughout the city. Yet, the programs our city needs most require participation at a personal level for the benefit of Chicago’s environment.

Mayor Emanuel would be well-advised to take great care to continue the momentum created over the last two decades, but should also realize that some of the most necessary changes are not as visible as landscaped medians or green roofs – they include altering public behavior and attitude toward recycling, reuse and their own property. The changes might be discreet, but the benefits will be felt by all.

NOTES

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- 5 Environmental Law and Policy Center, *Green Growth Platform for Chicago's Next Mayor: Candidates' Responses*, Jan. 18, 2011, available at <http://elpc.org/2011/01/18/mayoralgreenplatform>.
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- 11 City of Chicago Website, *Blue Cart Recycling Program*, available at www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/streets/provdrs/san/svcs/blue_cart_recycling.html.
- 12 Phone Interview with Kevin Crist, Intrinsic Landscaping, Lead Project Manager and Green Roof Expert, Mar. 2011.
- 13 *Id.*
- 14 Greenroof 101 FAQ, available at <http://www.greenroofs.com/Greenroofs101/faqs.htm> (last visited Mar. 28, 2011).
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- 16 Crist, *supra* note 12.
- 17 *Id.*
- 18 *Id.*
- 19 *Id.*
- 20 *Id.*
- 21 Jennifer J. Sackett Pohlenz, *The Chicago "Green" Code*, Green Space Today's Legal Corner, available at www.greenspacetoday.com/green-guide/green-space-today-s-legal-corner-querrey-harrows-green-lawlink-chicago-green-code.
- 22 Crist, *supra* note 12.
- 23 *Id.*
- 24 *Id.*